

**Governing via platform during crisis: *People's Daily* WeChat  
Subscription Account (SA) and the discursive production of COVID-  
19**

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Word count: 6,996 (including references, footnote and figure)

# **Governing via platform during crisis: *People's Daily* WeChat Subscription Account (SA) and the discursive production of COVID-19**

In early 2020, China witnessed the first case of COVID-19. The nation strived to manage the situation through stringent measures with the help of digital technologies including platforms. This article investigates the discursive production of COVID-19 on *People's Daily* Subscription Account (SA, *dingyue hao*), a state-affiliated media channel on the WeChat platform. Through a mixed approach using the walkthrough method and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this article uncovers the power dynamics existing within WeChat and how such dynamics shape the mode of discursive production during the health crisis. Findings reveal the role of *People's Daily* in commanding mainstream discursive production in support of the Chinese Communist Party's continuous quest to legitimise its use of platform media to guide its political subjects and supervise everyday practices of social life. This article can potentially contribute to consolidating understandings of the role of platform media in shaping political governance in contemporary China.

Keywords: WeChat; COVID-19; platform governance; digital media; China

## **Introduction**

China witnessed the first case of COVID-19 in Wuhan on January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020 (WHO, 2020). The nation quickly took action and strived to manage the situation through stringent measures with the help of digital technologies (Dai, 2020). At the same time, as many were confined at home and turned to digital platform media, nationalist sentiments were stirred up, morphing into a digital field of rivalry that applauded the effectiveness of China's biopolitical governance over other nation-states. Platform media hence becomes a site where discourses around COVID-19 have flourished and where Chinese people have been governed.

This article examines the discursive production of COVID-19 on *People's Daily* Subscription Account (SA, *dingyue hao*), a Chinese-Communist-Party-(CCP)-affiliated media channel on the WeChat platform. Instead of thinking political discourse as mere social-lingual expressions of political power and control, we treat discourse as a form of techno-social construction that is operationalised through platform media's structure. In

doing so, this article argues that *People's Daily* SA exploits the platform's techno-social affordances in commanding mainstream discursive production that supports the CCP's continuous quest to legitimise its use of bio-governance and opinion construction of COVID-19. In this way, the public imagination of COVID-19 is not only shaped by the State's power ossified in language use, but also by platform mechanism that is adapted to reinforce dominant power relations. Through this lens, the findings showcase that digital media (WeChat) has become an integral part of the State's political institutions in their everyday governance and management of public opinion.

To address the aim of the study, we used a smartphone centric approach that combined the platform walkthrough method (Light, Burgess, & Duguay, 2018) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The walkthrough method refers to critical analyses of the platform's interfaces, operational process (such as mechanisms of participation) and the governance of users and content creator. We utilised the method as a framework to investigate platform's techno-social mechanisms including the interface design, arrangement and structure. Additionally, we adopted CDA for a critical study of discursive production to uncover obscured power structures in language use that reproduced dominant power relations through online social practices. The combination of well-established methods is dedicated to acknowledging the ever-changing landscape of digital media and providing potential instructions for future research.

*People's Daily* WeChat SA was chosen for this study for two reasons. Firstly, WeChat is arguably the most popular social networking application in China, playing a crucial role in facilitating social practices and the process of socialisation (Harwit, 2017). According to the 2021 Annual Report of Tencent (parent company), WeChat has accumulated 1.26 billion monthly active users by the end of the year (Tencent, 2022). Given the breadth and depth of WeChat, our study narrowed the focus down to one prime functionality: WeChat SA - a key feature that the WeChat ecosystem has been dependent upon. As of December 2020, in total 1,628,662 accounts were hosted by the WeChat Public Account Service System with 38.7 million published content pieces in that year (NewRank, 2021). Secondly, *People's Daily* has traditionally been the mouthpiece of CCP (Wu, 1994) and functions as a state organ to disseminate China's political ideology (Triggs, 2019). However, research on its digital presence has been lacking. As WeChat becomes increasingly inspirable from the everyday lives of Chinese people, and *People's Daily* SA is a critical case which exemplifies how state-

owned digital media channels facilitate far-reaching influence (gsdata<sup>1</sup>, 2021), scholarly interventions are required to fill this gap.

By bringing together platform research and China studies, we treat digital platforms as productive of political actions and dominant power relations which in turn shape discursive production and reconfigure online social practices. This article first draws on current scholarship on platform governance in China (de Kloet, Poell, Zeng, & Chow, 2019; Plantin, & de Seta, 2019), and how the Chinese state is utilising digital media to supervise the discursive practices of moral principles and mould the civic behaviours of individual citizens (Keane & Su, 2019). We then examine the discursive production of COVID-19 through the rigorous debates from China studies to provide interpretations of the State's online political governance. This article contributes to the scholarship of platform governance by developing an approach that examines the techno-social production of political discourses. Such an approach can potentially go beyond the Chinese context to offer an alternative perspective that enriches the current debates around the power of platforms and their impacts on society.

### **Literature review: the Chinese approach of platform governance**

Platform media is generally conceptualised through critiques of capitalism which analyse platform's economic and commercial nature (Steinberg 2017), which have transformed social relations into new forms of relations of production (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). In western societies, platform capitalism is premised upon the asymmetric power relation between a platform and its users (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018). It is produced through the continuous interplays between the state, the market, the civil society and the general public (van Dijck, 2013). Through mechanisms like algorithmic nudging, surveillance and datafication, platform (big-tech giants) shapes and governs users' social experiences and social narratives (Zuboff, 2019). Hence, the notion of platform governance has become crucial to examine digital technologies' power in life.

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<sup>1</sup> gsdata (清博智能) is a major data mining organisation that provides statistical analysis and insights of China's new media industry. It has cooperated with and delivered big-data research services to leading Chinese technological firms. For more information, refer to <http://www.gsdata.cn/>

Platform governance has taken a different path in China, falling into two key areas: the State-business interaction that forms the backdrop of governance (Chen & Qiu, 2019) and the direct governing of everyday life via digital platforms (Keane & Su, 2019). While western scholarship primarily concerns how platform capitalism modifies social interactions for economic gain (Srnicek, 2016), platform studies in the Chinese context have identified major technological firms as key contributors in the process of national economic structuring (Wang & Lobato, 2019). These technological powers are expected to align with the State's goal of nation-building (Zhang, 2020) and to work closely with the State to provide the infrastructural support for the digitisation of social services (Plantin & de Seta, 2019). Within China's techno-political dynamics, the State is considered an authoritative institution to govern and supervise (Lin & de Kloet, 2019), which differs the case in western democratic societies. Moreover, Chinese authorities are increasingly relying on sophisticated models that incorporate the use of digital media (Keane & Su, 2019), which now underpins the governing of everyday experiences enabled by the joint efforts of the State and the market.

Following the latest conceptual thinking that social practices and relations are increasingly governed through digital media, Keane and Su (2019) have pointed out that consensus building remains central to the regulation of everyday life. From the State's perspective, digital media provides an effective way to create, mould, and disseminate moral codes of conduct, hence prompting individual citizens to follow and modify their social interactions with others. In the same vein, Gow (2017, p. 94) contends that the State's political vision is activated and strengthened by ongoing negotiations of social consent and civic participation 'through civil society institutions, which includes [...] media outlets'. In a digital era, the State's consensus building is now enhanced by digital media, where the government's grip on the web prevails. Current literature has focused on the governments' efforts to mobilise digital resources and platforms to build consensus across a range of issues such as social morality (Wang, 2021), public perception of everyday life (Chen, Kaye, & Zeng, 2021) and more recently, the social narrative of COVID-19 management (Litzinger & Ni, 2021).

An overarching narrative that contains topics of consensus management is the discursive construction of nationalism, which has been a dominant aspect of the Chinese internet (Jiang, 2012). In Schneider's understanding (2019), nationalism is a technology that produces political imaginaries in contemporary China. The nationalism-fuelled

virtual space is driven and sustained by ‘issues networks’ that are centrally organised by the Party-state. Such an imperative of China’s online culture has, crucially, shaped China’s online world as broadcasting-media-like, ‘one-to-many’ versus the conventional western wisdom that the online is participatory and vernacularly orientated. That said, online social practices are ultimately navigated by Chinese authorities, where dominant discourses are catalysed through network assemblage to reflect the Party-state’s political agenda. As discourse is not just the linguistic construction associated with particular worldviews but also the relevant social practices (Fairclough, 2012), current scholarship needs to further examine how linguistic constructions intersect with the techno-social practices via platforms. Hence, our analyses are poised to discover how platform’s construction of social practices is systematically organised through nudging and pushing to ensure that dominant discourse is continuously communicated in digital networks (such as WeChat).

In light of current debates on the COVID-19 pandemic, new ways of governing the body come to the fore where stringent means of political governance are deployed with the help of digital platforms. For the State, to execute its political power requires the creation, justification and dissemination of universal moral principles before individuals can learn and become the subject of them (Ci, 2014; Foucault, 1975/1995). Platform media’s affordances of scalability, modality and frequency expand the scope, legitimacy and effectiveness of the State’s governance and regulation. Seeking to understand how platform media contributes to the State’s quest to legitimise its means, we place the issue of platform power at the centre of this article’s inquiry. As reminded by de Kloet et al. (2019), platform governance in contemporary China constitutes a techno-political interplay between major digital players and the State, whose forces contribute to shaping users’ expectations of digital media use. In this regard, both techno-social affordances (how a platform is utilised) and political ideologies (how power is legitimised) remain pivotal to researching the role of platforms and the subsequent (re)configuration of social relations.

Hence, by treating platform media as constitutive of political governance and dominant power structures, we seek to understand how the State’s governance of online social practices is crystalised into the discourses of COVID-19, as well as how the techno-social affordances of platform media shape discourse as a form of social practice. This requires the understanding of political governance vis-à-vis COVID-19

across three critical scales: 1) the content representation of COVID-19; 2) the digital architecture within the platform.; 3) the contextual dynamics of Chinese platform governance. The study across these scales is crucial to understand the role of platform media in shaping discourse, where the interactions among the State, the market and the public manifest through the local, networked structure of digital platforms.

## **Methods**

The study adopted a mix-method approach to investigate the technological, social and political construction of COVID-19 on *People's Daily WeChat SA*. The approach combines the walkthrough method (Light et al., 2018) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The former provides a toolkit for researching the techno-social mechanisms of platform, whilst the latter allows a critical examination of how social relations are represented and perpetuated in language use as part of social life and structures (Fairclough, 1992). The combined approach was inherently driven by our critical self-reflexive process. The reason was due to 1) the travel restrictions of COVID-19 in China and Australia since early 2020; and 2) the fact that digital technologies have become more ubiquitous in people's life – both researchers are also users of the same technology under investigation. Hence, instead of merely observing *People's Daily's* texts, we reflected on the technical construction and strategic deployment of WeChat SA's algorithms in reinforcing, producing and disseminating the official use of language during the early phase of COVID-19 crisis in China.

The walkthrough method was utilised to examine the structural qualities of WeChat SA, concerning three key areas: 1) the context of platform uses, 2) the platform's technical mechanisms and 3) user experiences (Light et al., 2018). The first area attends to the contextual factors behind the functionalities, including the platform's vision, operating models, and governance of WeChat and *People's Daily's SA*. We studied official documents from Tencent's website about SA. We then undertook a 'technical walkthrough' to observe the interface arrangement, functions and features, textual content, and symbolic representations on *People's Daily's SA*. We have been able to examine these two areas to map the techno-social environments and structures of the construction of official COVID-19 content at the time. Since travelling to China to conduct fieldworks was not possible, traditional methods such as interviews became undesirable. To gain perspectives about platform users' experience, we documented our

critical reflections by observing the genre of key media texts, the linguistic construction of such, and the mode of distribution within WeChat. Such a self-reflexive approach is appropriate for Chinese platforms as previous studies have indicated, Chinese platform media's algorithms are not entirely fragmented to satisfy individuals' desires but also tasked to 'broadcast' the State's messages to construct a unified political subjectivity (Schneider, 2019; Wang, 2021). Hence different from traditional observational approach, the platform walkthrough method provides a grounded, user-orientated angle to investigate different technological, functional and governance aspects of the platform under examination.

With a thorough walkthrough, we then delved deep into the construction of discourse via CDA. Having both methods in action led us to develop understandings of how the utilisation of language adapted to WeChat SA's affordances on the one hand and remained consistent with the State's political agenda on the other. For CDA, data were retrieved via the indigenous search engine on the *People's Daily* SA (January – March 2020). The time frame was set because the first COVID-19 outbreak was recorded in Wuhan, China on January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2020, later mounting to WHO's assessment of a global pandemic on March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020 (WHO, 2020). In the course of retrieving data, commentary (人民锐评, *renmin ruiping*, RR) emerged as a key genre in our attempts. The character *rui* (literally, sharp) bespeaks the nature of the genre as being densely focused on commenting national public affairs. A preliminary study through searching 人民锐评 uncovered an intriguing pattern. In 2020, 79 were published, mainly on three major topical areas: COVID-19, Hong Kong (protest and election), and Taiwan (election). A significant number (n=33) was attributed to January – March 2020, with the majority (n=29) on the topic of COVID-19. In contrast, in the first four months of 2021 only three pieces of this genre were published. This preliminary study showed that the frequency of RR follows major societal events. In other words, the genre is only conjured up when the State urgently needs to stabilise public opinion, making it desirable for our research objective.

Following from this, we pinpointed the analytical focus on the RR genre; the textual materials (n=29) were collected manually through retrieving the hyperlink of each text on the SA. To analyse the data, we first examined the political purpose of RR's texts (Fairclough, 1992). We then evaluated how WeChat SA's algorithms worked



when distributing these political texts to facilitate the discursive production of COVID-19 governance. Fairclough's concept of overwording (1992), that is, the strategic use of words in the same or similar thematic domains to embody ideologies of 'the group responsible for it' (ibid., p. 193), guided the analysis to identify the symbolic-cultural construction of four major thematic domains: Novel Coronavirus Pneumonia, Governance, Nation and, People. These four domains have defined the political and ideological dynamic of COVID-19 governance not only because they were constantly mentioned in RR (posted texts) but were actively 'pushed' to readers through WeChat SA's platform operation. Analytically, we examined how the use of language and WeChat SA's in-platform functions worked together to construct the power of discourse for COVID-19 governance.

## **Findings and discussions**

### ***The dynamics of in-platform unequal power relation***

We first followed the platform walkthrough method to survey how *People's Daily SA* worked in distributing content during the research period and there were several aspects worth critical attentions. First, unlike conventional social media platform, *People's Daily SA* minimised user agency by limiting user interactions. This was achieved by 1) reducing interactions to merely liking, forwarding, and collecting; and 2) filtering comments through the system's in-built content moderation mechanism (Figure 1). With moderation, comments appearing as Top Comments indicated the State's preferred comments because they were pre-selected, which were then pushed to users to give a "thumb-up".

### **Insert Figure 1**

As an integral part of WeChat's digital ecosystem, SA has a fundamental difference than WeChat's private chat and friends' timeline functions: SA works on a one-to-many communications model (Harwit, 2017) where content is produced and 'broadcasted' by verified individuals, companies, organisations, news agencies, to a group of subscribers (users). The official content (hence, discourse) conveyed by *People's Daily* sets the 'tone' of users' private WeChat use. This is realised through the mechanism of 'inner-mediatisation' (Zhang & Wang, 2019), that is, SAs provide content for individuals to engage with through private conversations, without enabling

broad-based, multi-directional discussions via the entire digital network. This finding is consistent with previous studies' observations that the overall Chinese web still functions as if following a traditional mass communication logic, mixing control and censorship with seemingly increasing user agency that leads to small-walled, visceral construction of subjectivity (Jiang, 2012; Schneider, 2019). SA's one-way communication design can support the State's overall management of the digital sector by maximising exposure of political indoctrination, minimising actual engagements, and mitigating risks of online mobilisation against the Party-state.

To understand how official discourse about COVID-19 were integrated into WeChat users' private use, we scrutinised the structural operation of *People's Daily* SA. We found that the SA operated outside of WeChat SA's business governance because it had unlimited notification push. WeChat has capped SAs' daily content push to once (with maximum eight texts to be 'pushed' all at once to followers). *People's Daily*, however, had been consistently pushing content on average ten times throughout the day during the research period. Such a privilege was enhanced by an 'algorithmic re-iteration' (Tencent News, 2020) that matched users' interactions with an SA with more possibilities to be recommended in one's subscription chart. Hence, *People's Daily* came with higher possibilities to be engaged with and prioritised without considering user's preferences (Figure 1) – according to gsdata (2021), in March 2021 alone the SA ranked the most influential channel within WeChat, with 464 published texts, a 46-million viewership, 5.14 million likes and 10.4 million shares. This case contradicted Tencent's business model, which, at least in existing documents, specifies non-preferential for any account. It showcases that the State-business interaction underpins the operation of the platform, where the State holds the power to navigate the corporate aspect of the digital sector for political use (de Kloet et al., 2019). The result is the creation of an unequal platform structure, topped by state-owned media channels to ensure that discursive power is centralised within WeChat's network assemblage.

WeChat's in-platform hierarchy, which favours *People's Daily's* content over other SAs', defines that 'inner-mediatisation' is also an unequal dynamic that gives preferential treatments to state-run SAs. In other words, official SAs are more likely to exert influence on individuals or segmented online groups where social imaginations are formed and reinforced. In our understanding, *People's Daily* is a precise expression of China's digital mediascape. Its digital presence mirrors the traditional role of *People's*

*Daily* in commanding public opinion formation (Wu, 1994), deepens the State's strategies to purify online environment (Lin & de Kloet, 2019, SARFT, 2018) and contributes to establishing an omni-present matrix for mainstream consensus building. Under this logic, the governance of public opinion is woven into the fabric of the technical architecture and reproduced through the platform's techno-social affordances to target at individual users. As state-owned media governs citizens' behaviours through the discursive construction of 'behaviours *zeitgeist*' (Keane & Su, 2019, p. 4), discourse around behavioural moulding is no longer limited to symbolic-cultural production but instead the online social practices that are algorithmically organised, pushed and inner-mediatised to serve the State's aim. The next section builds on the discussion here to investigate the State's discursive productions on *People's Daily SA* and to contextualise how political power is ossified into the dynamic interactions among the State, the market and the public.

### ***Platform media and the discursive production of COVID-19 governance***

Commentaries on the *People's Daily* press have been documented as a type of 'command communication' (Wu, 1994) of social discourse that formulates public opinions (Triggs, 2019). Consensus building arises from the acceptance of the commentary genre as 'a vehicle of command': in Mao's era, a single commentary could mobilise a mass movement in the name of the collective future. Yet, in the context of platform media, *renmin ruiping* (RR) is a new type of genre convention; the character *rui* conveys a sense of sharpness as opposed to traditional commentary writing which is heavily laden with ideological indoctrination and long-winded language (Wu, 1994). Acknowledging the criticality of RR, in the following section we elucidate how various symbolic-cultural resources are utilised to consolidate dominate discourse and shape online social practices via platform's techno-social affordances.

### ***COVID-19 and the disciplined subject***

The overall tactic of the State was to uniformise the public imaginary through its 'vehicle of command' (RR) via platform media. In the COVID-19 crisis, discipline and responsibility were overworded as mechanisms to govern the people (*renmin*, the political subject). The cultural tradition of Spring Festival was conjured up to represent normalcy, which aligned with the State's intention to naturalise its control over the

situation. Political governance was further constructed via the strategic use of words in similar domains (prevention and control, cooperate and understand), and directed at the subject ('the group responsible for it'; Fairclough, 1992, p. 193):

Example 1: As the Spring Festival travel rush sets in, strict prevention and control measures must be strengthened. It is also desired that the general public understand and cooperate with the work of the health departments. (2020/01/21)

Example 2: Cooperating with quarantine, and strictly following the "Public Prevention Guidelines" are not only responsible for oneself, but also for family members and for the society. (2020/02/06)

The virus, on the other hand, was constructed as the 'other' because it provided an opportunity to escalate the digital civilisation project (Keane & Su, 2019) in educating the State's political subjects. The overwording of terms in the military domain (Fairclough, 1992) embodied the ideology that bestowed on the State leadership, and the people responsibility to abide with the State's regulations:

Example 3: The prevention and control of the Novel Coronavirus Pneumonia is a people's war without gun smoke, related to the interest of the whole and the overall stability of the society. (2020/01/27)

By militarising COVID-19 in the name of the people's war, the State is framed as the rightful political leader who subjugates its political subjects. The discursive power here is legitimised by the State's presumed role in supervising individual behaviours because the realisation of an individual self is based on the condition of a great State (Shih, 2002). In analysing the State's role from a cultural perspective, China studies scholars (Qing, 2011; Shih, 2002) have emphasised on the notion of paternalism. The concept of paternalism in China's context of political governance values the unequal yet reciprocal relationship between the governing entities and the subjects (Qing, 2011); in other words, it is morally right for 'parent officials' (*fumu guan*) to have privilege in governing their subjects. Such a cultural concept is well translated into the discursive production of COVID-19, where power is justified by naturalising the State as the inevitable leader in this war on the virus.

Furthermore, considering the unequal platform structure discussed before, discursive power is no longer purely ideological and manifesting in language use.

Instead, it is enabled by the State's leadership in and empowering of the digital sector, where a commercial facet (Tencent) is incorporated into the State's political power with the help of WeChat's techno-social affordances. By utilising Tencent's technologies, the State's discursive power is amplified through the unequal platform structure, precisely around *People's Daily SA*. At the top of the platform structure, the account can exploit the platform's affordances to push dominate discourse since 1) it does not have a limit to the number of daily posts; and hence 2) it has higher visibility and separability because it was more likely to be recommended by algorithm and engaged with by individual users. Hence, with the mechanism of 'inner-mediatisation' (Zhang & Wang, 2019), the techno-social elements of WeChat SA contribute to the co-production and reinforcement of existing discourses that stretch between the semi-public SAs and the users' private networks (setting a potential agenda for small-walled discussions).

As the SA push its political discourse, the public imagination of the pandemic has been reproduced through sharing and communicating within individual networks to ensure consistency. This showcases the capability of the Chinese government in exploiting a deeply rooted notion (political paternalism) to justify the use of platform media at its disposal. As Foucault (1975/1995) argues, power is a reproductive force that permeates into social institutions. Thus, the State's power extends from the discourse constructed in language and transmits into the SA, whose form effectively expands the frequency and modality of subjecting individuals to moral codes of discipline preferred by the State (Ci, 2014). The subjugation process is not coercive but normalised through the daily social interactions within WeChat, masking the reproduction of existing social relations through innocuous acts of actively passive participation (e.g., thumb-up).

#### *COVID-19, public shaming and the digitisation of pandemic management*

Mobilising online political action was another salient example that showcased how the Chinese government was utilising COVID-19 to subtly push its digital civilisation project (Keane & Su, 2019). Uncivilised/undesirable conducts were overworded (Fairclough, 1992) through RR, which were distributed with the help of platform participatory affordances to enlist users in morally policing their fellow citizens:

Example 4: Zhihong Tang (Director of Health Department at Huanggang) denied all knowledge of her incompetence; ‘I have no idea’. Public opinion is in an uproar. (2020/01/31)

On the post of Example 4, the filtering mechanism of the SA comment section were strategically deployed to orchestrate a State-favoured version of public opinion, without affording offenders to defend for the case. The mechanism was exploited to represent the ‘uproar’ where every comment expressed the same perspective – to morally shame the offender. Public shaming was constructed through techno-social affordances to prompt users to like, share and reproduce the State’s discourse. For example, the top two user comments pre-selected/pushed added onto the discursive overwording of uncivilised/undesirable conducts in the official content (targeted blaming at the person that failed the State and the people):

- Comment 1: Is she a Communist Party cadre if she is in her position and does not seek her own government? (28,000 thumb-ups)
- Comment 2: When an official does not make the decision for the people, it is better for her to go home and sell potatoes. (21,000 thumb-ups)

Releasing personal information means that the person becomes searchable and vulnerable to the ‘human flesh search engine’ in China (Gao & Stanyer, 2013). The State’s efforts in filtering public opinion and releasing targetable information suggest the government’s deliberate intention to push the public, one way or another, to utilise the searchability of social media platforms to further shame and punish the person of wrongdoings. Contrary to knowledge about human flesh search as a form of grassroots-orientated participatory practice to hunt for corrupt officials or citizens (Herold, 2011), the human flesh search observed here was orchestrated by the State. WeChat SA’s affordances of broadcasting and inner-mediatisation, as well as its preferential treatment for state channels, amplifies the scale, modality and intensity of online hunting, to produce a State’s moral and political subject for COVID-19 governance. WeChat SA’s affordances and governance help the State to tread a fine line between eschewing punishment (e.g., prison) and prompting individuals to identify with the preferred codes of conduct (as the comments and thumb-ups in this post suggest).

The construction of public shaming in RR exemplifies how discursive power is constructed via language use and WeChat SA’s algorithms and platform governance. As

power is centralised through the platform, a clear top-down governing structure can be identified in the nationwide management of COVID-19, first manifesting through discursive representations. The ideology of governance was embodied through the overwording of control and prevention (Fairclough, 1992), which typified the political purpose of the RR genre to justify the State's means in mobilising resources and, nonetheless, building mainstream consensus around its administrative operations:

Example 5: In the national prevention and control of the epidemic, all forces must work as hard as they can, focusing on the big picture as if playing a game of chess, and no one move can be paralysed. (2020/01/27)

Example 6: Key medical emergency prevention and control materials are under the direct, unified management and allocation of the State Council. (2020/02/06)

A full embrace of Confucian ethics (the top-down structure and political paternalism), which has formed the core strategy in CCP's media propagandic regime (Qing, 2011), are now increasingly promoted with the help of advanced technologies (Chang & Ren, 2018). In the digital ecosystem, WeChat SA's affordances (algorithmic pushing and notification) intensely propel these ethics and infuse them into large-scaled yet small-walled communication practices. WeChat as a digital solution is incorporated into the Party-state's holistic governance of society during COVID-19. As Plantin and de Seta (2019) remarks, WeChat is paradigmatic of how digital platforms provide infrastructural support for the government to ensure the uniformity of its governing practices. The State's collaboration with Tencent can be perceived through how WeChat hosts an extensive matrix of social services that are COVID-19-related, where digital platforms help to consolidate the administrative power for the State's pandemic management (Sun & Wang, 2022). For example, the COVID-19 Health Tracking Code International Mini Program - part of WeChat's services that allow overseas citizens to board flights back to China (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.) – is featured on the *People's Daily* SA interface and managed by People's Daily Institute, a traditional state organ that pioneers in governing the national media propagandic regime.

Hence, the digitisation of COVID-19 management and social governance suggests the State's new-found power, evident in the construction of the virus in language (RR) and more importantly, the State-business interaction that produces new layers (algorithmic, commercial and so on) in power relations. By looking at discursive

power on both perspectives of language and State-business interaction, it is found that the Chinese government devises indirect mechanisms of pushing, persuading and mobilising digital resources to expand its legitimacy of a paternalistic leader and its jurisdiction. Users learn to become the subject of mainstream moral codes (the acceptance of lockdown, quarantine, and preferred conducts for the collective wellbeing). As the Chinese society becomes increasingly digitised, the case of *People's Daily SA* materialises the State's continuous quest to refine the power of ubiquitous digital technologies to govern its political subjects. Digital platforms (WeChat) have become an effective and accelerating opportunity for the State to infuse and uniformise dominant discourses, and a means and solution to eminent social issues.

## **Conclusion**

This article has examined the discursive production of COVID-19 on *People's Daily SA*. In times of the health crisis, the role of platform media (WeChat) within the broader social governance is underpinned by the interactions between the State, the market and the public in China. By walking through WeChat's SA system and critically analysing discursive power, the article has advanced the understanding of political governance with the case of COVID-19, which essentially pivots around three distinct yet inter-related scales:

- (1) the production of COVID-19 discourse that is enabled by the techno-social affordances of the WeChat SA system
- (2) the unequal platform structure that systematically reconfigures interactive patterns through algorithmic nudging and pushing while prioritises state-owned channels (*People's Daily SA*)
- (3) the ideological, cultural and digital resources exploited by the State for governing purposes that prevail in the digital ecosystem in contemporary China

Our analyses have been guided by these scales that altogether present a comprehensive view of the cultural, political and to a limited degree, user's (personal) perspectives to observe the State's reinforcement of existing social relations via platform media at the COVID-19 historical conjuncture.



As the discourse of COVID-19 continues to thrive, the pandemic has arguably proven an opportunity for the State to manipulate public perceptions of crisis management, governance and subjugation, which contributes to deepening the digital civilisation project as conceptualised by Keane & Su (2019). Platforms like WeChat become a sphere to execute discursive power (Foucault, 1975/1995) through language use over the body during times of crisis, and to govern digitally individualised subjects on a daily basis (see Zuboff, 2019). Digital media hence has become an integral part of the State's political machines. The notion of platform governance has evolved from 'platform's governance of users' and 'the State's governance of the platform (market)', to a joint governance of the everyday social life by political and economic institutions.

*People's Daily SA* has shed light upon the State's role in taking advantages of the digital media sphere – an active navigator of China's digital economy (Keane & Su, 2019; Lin & de Kloet, 2019). It is a case in point to scrutinise the co-dependency between the State and large technological corporations, where many factors have coalesced that showcase how the State's power has steered the wheel of the development of the Chinese digital sector. The co-dependency proves that the State is willing to collaborate with non-state entities (Schneider, 2019), and expecting them to support China's social governance (Zhang, 2020). In fact, the Chinese digital web has never been separated from its non-digital media institutions (Wang, 2019). State-controlled traditional institutions (such as the People's Daily Institute) are embracing opportunities in the digital field so that the Party's political agenda is effectively secured in China's digital sphere.

The critical discussions in this article also affirm with existing knowledge of the Chinese state's moral governing style that is excessively exhibited in President Xi's reign (Gow, 2017). It contributes to the growing corpus of research that scrutinises the complex interactions between the State and Chinese technological corporations (de Kloet et al., 2019; Keane & Su, 2019; Plantin & de Seta, 2019). In this context, the quintessential recurrence of the philosophy of paternalism (the unequal yet reciprocal relation) remains critical. Through CDA, it has found that deep rooted cultural notions have been appropriated by the State to justify 1) its implementations of stringent means of governance; and more importantly 2) the use of digital media to set a far-reaching benchmark for moral behaviours. The framework of paternalism can potentially become

an analytical lens that adds a cultural perspective for researching the dynamics of platform governance as the Chinese society continues to be digitised.

### **Disclosure statement**

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest.

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Figure 1 Walking through *People's Daily* and the SA interface

